A Magnum Opus

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Peggy lifted her hand above her head, middle finger and thumb pinched. She puckered her lips and puffed air to dislodge the tea bag that had settled in the corner of her eye. Several women faced her, shuffling their feet on the stage floor, tea bags swirling from the brims of their hats. Some held funnel-capped kazoos to their lips. One woman clutched a ukulele. Another rested a cluster of metal spoons against the ridges of a wooden washboard that hung from a clothesline around her neck. In the back row, a large woman fidgeted with a broom handle stuck in a washtub, twirled it a few times before wrapping her fingers around the broom. Peggy drew a deep breath, snapped her fingers, and raised a toilet plunger over her head just as Mother's fingers skipped rhythmically up the bass keys of the piano and the women began to sing. *Oh, When the Saints Go Marching In.* I sat in the back row of the gym, a chubby, adolescent girl mortified and yet begrudgingly impressed by my mother's willingness to make a fool of herself on the stage.

Until the summer of 1999, I hadn't thought much about Peggy and those other women. Then they came back to me on a hot steamy July day when I was worn out from dismantling my mother's home after she had moved to an assisted living facility —filling garbage bags with magazines, tattered linens, out-of-date catalogs and calendars, stuffing boxes with pots and pans, cookbooks, knickknacks, and worn shoes. The air conditioning had been turned off and my head throbbed from the heat and the dust in the carpet. Sweat dampened my neck and the back of my knees. When I was done, all that remained was a withered balloon dangling from the ceiling, the word *Grandmother* collapsed in wrinkles of latex. I couldn't bring myself to tear it down, this sad proof of a woman's life in this house.

At the end of the day, I went into the knotty pine room where my mother's piano and organ, her most precious possessions, waited to be hauled away to other homes. They sat adjacent to one another so she could play them both at the same time, which she often did. I had never spent a day in this house without hearing my mother play ragtime and boogie woogie. Now I heard only the soft wailing of the wind, nature's muted saxophone blowing against the window screens. I ran a finger over the yellowed keys of the upright and coaxed a melody from the ivories. *Oh when the saints go marching in*. But the piano was out of tune, and the lively ditty was a funeral dirge.

Tucked in a stack of sheet music on the top of her upright was a glossy photo of my mother, Peggy, and several women gathered around a poster board that read: Chamberlain Tea Bags, the name of the kitchen band they formed in the 1960's.

Kitchen bands are an offshoot of jug bands, sometimes called skiffle bands or spasms bands, a uniquely American style of music born in the early twentieth century. Like the Tea Bags, the musicians played home-made instruments—spoons, washtubs, washboards, and maracas made of dried beans and canning jars. The members were mostly men, except for a few women who flaunted expectations for women by playing in juke joints and street corners.

I sat on the bench staring at the picture thinking of the first time I saw the Tea Bags perform at the Brule County Farm Show. The National Guard Armory smelled of coffee, dry hay bales, cigarette smoke, and cotton candy whirling around a cylinder. Men in seed caps ran their hands over combines and manure spreaders and kicked tractor tires with muddy boots. Farm wives clustered around appliance booths admiring harvest-gold ovens and refrigerators. Girls dashed around the room screaming, balloons tied to their wrists, while boys dueled with yardsticks from the lumberyard. All must have seemed like threatening music critics to the Tea Bags who peeked through the door at the ever-growing crowd.

The program began with ten-year-old Joey Mitchell's demonstration of his perfect pitch. His piano teacher, Winnie Willrodt, plunked a key and then nodded at Joey who duplicated the sound. By the time she was done, Joey had sung twenty or thirty notes. Most of us couldn't have recognized if he was off key or not. But Joey was the town's only genuine prodigy so the audience applauded politely. The high school jazz band took the stage next performing "Satin Doll" and "In the Mood," led by Charlie Roberts, whose stumpy arms were shovels moving through mud as he strained to keep the players on beat. And although the difference between the two numbers was barely perceptible, everyone clapped for them as well.

When time came for the Tea Bags' performance, Peggy raised a toilet plunger wrapped in white tulle and decorated with satin ribbons above her head and led the band onto the stage in the flickering of flashbulbs and whistles from husbands. The fringes on her

satin dress shimmied with each long-legged stride, and a necklace of pop-beads bounced across her flat chest. She was tall and carried herself with the flair of a regal if ridiculous diva. She was the perfect conductor for a kitchen band.

Despite her horsey face enclosed in a parenthesis of spit curls, Peggy was a glamorous woman who understood the value of an entrance. Every Sunday she arrived late for mass and strode down the aisle of St. James Catholic Church wearing suits rumored to be designed and sewn for her by a tailor in Minneapolis. Diamonds glittered on her fingers and wrists, and a stuffed mink draped around her neck. When I was a small girl, I longed to reach out and stroke its silky fur; at the same time, I feared the pointy-headed creature with its beady eyes glaring at me. Altar boys in lacy vestments scampered to keep up with Peggy, their tennis shoes squeaking on the linoleum. Bringing up the rear of this weekly parade was Father Mac whose bushy eyebrows collided in a scowl, whose jowls jiggled as he huffed down the aisle.

The most fleet-footed member of the band was Geneva, a bulky woman with a double chin and toothy grin, During WWII, her husband, Joe, was stationed in Reno, and they often drove to Long Beach where she learned to dance the Lindy to Duke Ellington's orchestra. I like to imagine them stepping out of the shadows of war into rainbows of light cast by a crystal ball revolving overhead; like to think of Joe grabbing his young bride and whirling her over

his arm, her skirt and legs a pinwheel of fabric and flesh. Geneva's good cooking and numerous pregnancies put pounds on her over the years. Still when she danced to "Alley Cat" in top hat, black t-shirt and stretch pants, a long tail pinned to her buttocks, she was that nimble-footed, light-hearted girl who once cavorted to "A Train."

A wiry woman with platinum hair, flat breasts, and leathery skin, Jonnie strummed her ukulele as she sang *I wanna go back to my little grass shack in Kealakekua, Hawaii,* floating across the stage in a Hawaiian shirt and lime-colored sneakers. Her boyish hips in white pedal pushers swiveled so fluidly she seemed to have no bones beneath her skin. She was a nurse who lived a quiet life in a log cabin overlooking the Missouri River where she often trolled for walleye, wrestling those feisty fish out of the water as easily as she lifted patients from their hospital beds. Jonnie was the only divorced woman I knew, and that coupled with her masculine appearance and lack of children, made her mysterious to me.

Tillie, a dog-faced woman with wiry gray hair, spoke in a voice that sounded as if she had swallowed a bucket of gravel. We nicknamed her Ma Kettle after a hard-luck movie character who ruled her ineffectual husband and brood of children with equal parts of love and neglect. She played the washtub bass which she devised by drilling a hole in the bottom of an old galvanized washtub, sticking a broom handle through the hole, and then stapling a piece of cord to the top of the handle and running the other end through a metal ring inside the tub. When she plucked the cord, it created the thud of a mallet striking the soft head of a bass drum. Tillie was a fry cook at a truck stop working behind the counter with her apron tucked up beneath her sagging breasts. She flipped pancakes with same laconic motion she used to pluck the washboard string.

Flamboyant and sexual, Dixie kept her body tight by exercising, most often in her bra and white panties, to the record "Go You Chicken Fat Go." She was a secretary for Bell Telephone at a time when being a secretary was a sexy job. Or perhaps Dixie made it seem sexy. She strutted down Main Street in tight skirts and frilly blouses, her cheeks and lips cherry red, violet shadow above her chocolate eyes, and lashes thick with black mascara. The washboard she played bounced against her chest as she sashayed across the stage reminding many of the men of her were perky, round breasts behind it.

Then there was my mother. I grew up hearing the story, perhaps true, perhaps not, of the day my mother, Marie McManus, the youngest of a large Irish clan, crawled up on the piano stool, her stubby legs dangling over the linoleum floor, arched her wrists above the ivories, and played "Tantum Ergo" with chubby three-year-old fingers. When she was done, she twirled on the piano stool, climbed off, and staggered outside to play, her head spinning. Her family was a wee woozy themselves at this unexpected gift of their her talent. During the Tea Bags' shows, she played "The Tiger Rag" with such ferocity she nudged a spinet across the floor. People in Chamberlain often compared her to Joanne Castle, the bleached-blonde, honky-tonk pianist with the dazzling smile on Lawrence Welk's show. But I knew they were looking through the wrong lens; Joanne Castle played like my mother.

It was a wooden performance at the Farm Show that night lacking the abandon I had witnessed in their rehearsals at our house. Peggy sidestepped around the stage, waving the plunger, and turning around now and then to work the crowd, a determined smile on her face. The Tea Bags appeared relieved when the number was over, and although the audience applauded, I suspect each lady prayed, as I did, that time would pass quickly.

Peggy looked at the women and whispered, "Damn, you sounded like the Mormon Tabernacle Choir doing ragtime. Come on now, gals, let's have some fun!"

Geneva began to dance to "Alley Cat." whipping the long tail back and forth behind her. Midway through the song, she slithered down the steps, plopped on Father Mac's lap, and sang *He goes on the prowl each night, like an old alley cat.* Father Mac's face reddened, but he forced a smile as he dug his elbow into her fleshy hip to nudge her off his lap. Perhaps not being Catholic, Geneva did not understand how her brash act blurred the reverence his collar demanded. Or maybe she knew what she was doing. In later years, Geneva would recall this moment as her finest performance.

By the time Peggy led the beat into "Bill Bailey," the women were lost in the music, and they cavorted to a cacophony of discordant sounds—the thud, thud, thud of the metal bass, the twinging and twanging of the ukulele's strings, the kreech, kreech, kreeching of metal against the washboard's ridges. The kazoos were angry bees buzzing around the stage, and the

women danced as if a swarm were attacking them. *Won't you come home, Bill Bailey?* They shook their shoulders, tapped their feet, and bobbed their heads, the tea bags on their hats swaying so wildly I grew dizzy just watching them. *I know I done you wrong.*

Jonnie challenged Geneva in a contest of moves. She swayed back and forth, bent forward at the waist so deeply that her head nearly touched her knees and then instantly bent backwards so far that her breasts soared toward the ceiling.

Remember that rainy evening, I turned you out.

In answer, Geneva broke from the pack and danced the Charleston, arms pumping back and forth around her ample hips, feet zigging and zagging in front of, behind, and around one another, the tail whirling wildly behind her until finally she ran out of breath and staggered across the stage to collapse on the piano bench. "Damn, Marie," she panted to my mother, "The room went black. I thought I was having a stroke."

Feeding off that energy, Peggy transformed into an ageless majorette high stepping from one side of the stage to the other, her back straight and her head held high, knees nearly touching her chest with each step as she directed the band with the festive toilet plunger, its brilliant ribbons flashing. *With nothing but a fine tooth comb*

Dixie waited until the other women had moved stage left and then made her play, which cemented her certain claim as the town's only sex symbol. She turned her back to the audience and wiggled her well-tuned fanny in its skin-tight capris in a syncopated pattern--da,da,da-da-da-da-- and then in less than one beat of the song whipped herself around to repeat the fanny shake one more time while singing *I know I'm to blame, now ain't that a shame? Bill Bailey won't you please come home?*

The crowd went wild.

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The Tea Bags crisscrossed the state performing at farm shows, county fairs, class reunions, charity benefits, the State Fair and Snow Queen contests. Because they needed space for their instruments and costumes, Geneva's husband, Joe, agreed to chauffeur the women in his van, and they crowded on benches and lawn chairs tucked between tool boxes and coils of wire. They must have been hilarious, those journeys these women made around the state, the van hazy with smoke from Pall Mall cigarettes, women singing in harmony, and boisterous laughter bouncing off the windows.

Later, I would see a different snapshot of those trips, details that my tee-totaling mother would not have stored in her memory album. The women sometimes carried flasks of whisky with them, took frequent sips on those long drives, and once created a scene in a restaurant when Peggy crawled under the table to grab Mother's leg whose loud screech set off howls of laughter that startled other diners.

"Mother, were some of the women drinking before the shows?" I asked her once.

"Oh, that's ridiculous," she said and changed the subject. I was used to such evasion from her. My mother often framed her life the way she wanted it to be seen. But sometimes, for no clear reason, she would illuminate a person's story with surprising details. "You know," she said one day, "Peggy spent a lot of time in her house with a fifth of vodka."

And then, years later, apropos of nothing we were discussing, Mother remarked, "You know, Jonnie preferred women to men."

"Are you telling me that Jonnie was a lesbian?" I asked.

Mother squinted at me, annoyed at my ignorance. "I didn't say that." Truth's narrow aperture brought Jonnie into focus, but at the same time it blurred her image. I better understood who she was, but it puzzled me how she coped in that little river town. Later I learned that Jonnie and Harriet, one of the kazoo players, sat close to one another on a bench in the van and covered their laps with a blanket. Soon the blanket rippled in soft waves and the women closed their eyes, their breathing rapid and shallow. Did the Tea Bags ever acknowledge or discuss these moments of furtive pleasure? Did they even understand what they saw? If so what prompted this group of conventional women in 1960 rural America to overlook a sexuality that must have shocked them? Perhaps like the women who played in juke joints and street corners, the Tea Bags relished the opportunity to thumb their noses at small-town conventions. But why did Mother, who despised cigarettes and booze and anything that hinted of sex, as so many Irish mothers do, tolerate this behavior?

Years later, on seeing the Tea Bags' photo, an image came to me. I am sipping a Tom Collins in a room papered in a red-flocked *fleur de lis* pattern and lit by tapers flickering through amber-colored glass of wrought-iron sconces. Around me are pheasant hunters who have to come to my hometown where

game birds outnumber people. They smell of muddy grass and bloody feathers and the sweet sharp smell of whiskey. They slouch over the bar, elbows splayed over the countertop, and banter with my mother who sits at a piano in the middle of a horseshoe-shaped bar. Her eyes are closed and a dreamy smile curves toward her round cheeks as she bends over the keys. I look at the men, their eyes glazed, tongues stumbling and collapsing until consonants become vowels. Do they understand this moment when a woman and piano yield to one another as lovers do? I realize now that whether smoky vans or lounges, lusty women or drunken hunters, Mother played because she had no choice. She needed an audience astonished at the sight of her hummingbird fingers flittering over the keys as she improvised more fill notes and chords, tremolos and trills, arpeggios and accents than the composer might have imagined.

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Peggy's life and spirit seemed so indomitable that the news she'd died quietly in her sleep one June morning stunned the entire town. The Tea Bags dialed up one another to reflect on the event, which seemed incomprehensible, beyond explanation to them.

"Imagine that, Marie," Tillie said, her gravelly voice soft with emotion, "she just up and died on us. Just like that, she up and died."

When Peggy's daughter asked them to sing at her mother's funeral, they were flattered and yet concerned about the propriety of doing so. But they could not refuse. In a hastily planned rehearsal, the Protestant women tried to learn the Latin and the close harmony of the Gregorian chants, with little success. Mother said at supper that night, "We sound so draggy and dreary. Peggy would hate this."

On the day of the service, I sat in the choir loft nauseated by the fragrance of roses and incense and something I would soon realize smelled of anarchy. As Mother played the prelude, she chewed on her bottom lip and stared over the sanctuary at something only she could see or imagine. I assumed she was holding back tears at memories of Peggy striding down the aisle, Father Mac hustling to catch up with her; Peggy prancing around the stage, her toilet plunger held high. But I was wrong.

When the signal was given to begin the procession, I opened the hymnal to "Veni, Creator Spiritus" and waited for Mother to play the simple notes that led to the melody. But Mother had made a decision that was to become the Tea Bags' finest hour. Softly, almost imperceptibly, she tapped the bass pedal in a familiar, syncopated rhythm. The Tea Bags knew immediately what she was doing. They began to sing reverently *Oh, when the Saints, Go Marching In.* The first time through the song, Mother and the Tea Bags kept a somber mood. But as they began the refrain for the second time, they saw the pallbearers carrying Peggy's flower-covered casket down the aisle. They raised the volume as Mother picked up the pace, adding notes and trills not heard in church. People in the pews below whipped around and looked up at the choir, eyes wide, mouths curved downward in shock or perhaps disgust at such irreverence on this day of mourning. Babies sitting on their mothers' laps clapped their hands or shook their rattles. Small children danced in the pews. Father Mac following Peggy down the aisle one last time signaled furiously to the mortician, jerked his head toward the choir loft, and mouthed, "Do something. Now!" Flushed, his hands fluttering around his face, the mortician dashed up the stairs shaking his head at the women and hissing, "Stop. Stop it." Undaunted, the Tea Bags sang on, and as the casket arrived at the altar, they reached the final stanza with unrestrained fervor *Oh, well, I want to be in that number, when the saints go marching in.* And when the bedlam subsided, and order was again restored, they smiled at one another, knowing they had just given a final, triumphant tribute to a woman who knew the value of an entrance.